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“THE WESTERN PACIFIC THEATER OF OPERATIONS: A BREWING SHOWDOWN”

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The United States (US) has had a military presence in the Western Pacific for well over a century and for the past three quarters of a century has had zero impedance from other nations in regards to who controls the Pacific Ocean. Over the past quarter century the Nation of China has blossomed both economically and militarily. China has claimed exclusive rights to territory that has been disputed for thousands of years. Within this territory are vast expanses of premier fishing grounds, untapped natural resources and shipping lanes that account for over half of the world's merchant shipping along with other resources such as natural gas and oil. China has expanded its military footprint well beyond the 12 mile territorial limit as described by the Law of the Sea to which 162 countries are signatories. With China's increased military presence in the region it can be argued that the US has lost regional influence and diminished military dominance in the region. This research will look at what the US needs to do to regain influence and prestige within the Asia Pacific area of operations.

A problem/solution method will be utilized to answer the aforementioned question and what will be required by the US to achieve these objectives. Can the US and China cooperate against mutual adversaries and how will US military technology perform in a potential matchup with China's newest and most advanced weaponry? China is preparing for the future by being proactive to protect their own interests despite international backlash against their actions. As the US and the world focus their attention to the Asia Pacific for the foreseeable future, there are serious ramifications should concerned parties misinterpret intentions.

## INTRODUCTION

“This is the future we seek in the Asia Pacific -- security, prosperity and dignity for all. That’s what we stand for. That’s who we are. That’s the future we will pursue, in partnership with allies and friends, and with every element of American power. So let there be no doubt: In the Asia Pacific in the 21st century, the United States of America is all in”.

Barack Obama,

President of the US<sup>1</sup>

### *Overview of the Study*

The US has had a dominating presence in the Asia Pacific region for the past three quarters of a century with minimal challenges to that dominance after Japan’s defeat in World War II. US military installations were strewn across the Pacific to ensure global reach and global power. With technological improvements such as jet aircraft and midair refueling the cost savings associated with these advancements enabled the US to downsize its footprint in the region. With the US military footprint getting smaller it can be argued that our influence and dominance in the region has also diminished. With the rise of China, the US now faces a near equal challenger in the region. China is rapidly becoming an influence in regional affairs in the Western Pacific, most notably the South China Sea (SCS). With this economic and military rise, it is paramount now more than ever that the US still maintains its responsibility to its strategic partners and friends in the region to preserve peace, stability and freedom of navigation in the Asia Pacific.

### *The Nature of the Problem*

The US has lost a modicum of dominance in portions of the Western Pacific Theater of Operations since the end of WWII. Over the course of the past quarter century the US Department of Defense has taken for granted the military superiority the US has enjoyed by reducing our footprint in the region, closing installations and employing more of an expeditionary forces model in the region. The National Defense Policy has focused our time, effort and monies on other theaters of the world, while reducing our defense expenditures in the Western Pacific region over the past several decades. During this same time frame China has increased their defense budget and territorial real estate in the Pacific. Some critics have claimed that the US has an advantage over all other militaries in the Pacific based on our defense spending, technological advantages and lack of any real challenge in the region. This theory has never been tested, as the US had not had any engagements with near peer adversaries in recent time. China continues to expand economically and militarily as they yearn to be an equal to the US on the world stage. The US needs to mitigate the emerging threat from China by increasing diplomatic and economic relations with China, while preparing militarily if diplomacy fails.

In recent years, the freedom of movement the US has enjoyed in the Western Pacific has been impeded by China. As China becomes more of an economic and military power on the world stage, they have flexed some of their territorial muscle in the East and SCS region and are laying claim to disputed territory. As part of this strategy, they are expanding their global reach and influence, both militarily and geographically. Part of China's expansion includes the creation of landmasses upon reefs in the SCS specifically for the purpose of military operations. China is actively fielding advanced technology in this expanded area for early detection capabilities to alert Chinese military officials of other nations who are operating in the area<sup>2</sup>. This presents a



problem for the US due to our reliance upon air superiority and dominance of the skies when engaged in air to air combat.

With anti-access/area-denial technology (A2/AD) further away from the Chinese mainland, it is more difficult to surprise our adversaries should a conflict break out. “Air superiority is the absolute precondition for air power being freely utilized in air-to-ground missions”<sup>3</sup> and to support the US in its military objectives. A recent national strategy paper published by Chinese military officials outlines that their destiny is interrelated with the world as a whole and “China’s armed forces will remain a staunch force in maintaining world peace”<sup>4</sup>. China’s actions have put the US in a position where they are challenging US presence in disputed territories. This is a position the US has not faced and will ultimately alter the Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTP’s) military personnel utilize while in the region. By China increasing its military footprint and economic influence in the region, the US will have to increase its military spending and cooperation in the region beyond what is currently in place. This will be necessary to maintain a logistical chain sufficient to support enduring military operations should conflict break out.

If the US fails to develop additional relationships and military support agreements in the region, the days of ‘island hopping’ akin to World War II may become prevalent again. Island hopping is where the US established a line of overlapping islands in the Pacific to stage military operations. This process continued until Allied forces had control of enough islands to sustain large amount of forces and a logistical chain to support the fight against the Japanese Empire. While the US does have agreements with several nations in the Asia-Pacific Region, it is unknown if those nations would allow military operations out of their air and sea ports if armed conflict broke out. The Problem is that China is currently building economic and military ties

with nations around the world to extend its global influence. China is currently the largest exporter of merchandise in the world. With labor rates much cheaper among other factors, companies from all over the world have flocked to China to capitalize on their bottom line<sup>5</sup> The problem is much more complex than lower labor costs, but the trend will continue until the US Government changes its tax code for businesses, which are currently the highest in the world at 39%<sup>6</sup>. Until that time comes when corporate tax rates are changed, China will continue to be one of the countries that benefits when American companies decide to pick up and move off shore.

### ***The Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of this study is to look at what the US can do to regain military influence in the Western Pacific Theater of Operations. The Unified Combatant Command who has a daily presence in the area and assures our neighbors and strategic allies that the US is ready and willing to engage should the need arise is the US Pacific Command (PACOM). The Pacific Command is one of six geographic Unified Combatant Commands for the US military, and includes nearly half the world's surface area, stretching from the west coast of the US to the western border of India, spanning Antarctica to the North Pole. Included in this area is more than half the world's population, and an economic engine which includes two of the largest economies in the world.<sup>7</sup> Currently there are approximately 330,000 forces from all branches of the US military in the region to protect and defend American interests. This number is anticipated to rise in the coming years due to a pivot or rebalance towards the region.

### ***The Research Question***

The world is a rapidly changing environment, with the interconnectivity of the human race and the 24-hour news cycle, nothing happens in one part of the globe without the other side knowing about it almost instantaneously. The issue is not the lack of information or the

intelligence sharing amongst partner countries. The US and China know what each other are doing by utilizing their extensive intelligence resources; the issue is lack of trust. If the trust and communication between countries can be strengthened the possibility of conflict can be reduced. Therefore the research question for this study is “How can the United States re-gain military influence with our strategic partners and allies while gaining cooperation with China in the Western Pacific Theater of Operations”?

### ***Research Methodology***

This research study will utilize the problem/solution framework to provide a possible course of action for the nation’s defense for the Western Pacific. The research will look at the historical background of the issue. This background will demonstrate that the Chinese and others in the Asia Pacific region have been contesting real estate for many centuries but no one has made any measurable progress towards backing up their claims. Now that China is a rising power in the world and making measurable progress on their claims it is now more important than ever to substantiate why the Western Pacific is vital to our national security interests. The research will then look at the actions that resulted in the United States’ steady decline in the region and what is needed to become relevant again. The paper will then look into the new policy regarding the Obama Administration’s “Pivot Towards Asia/Pacific Region”. The paper will explore the ramifications for inaction and the consequences for national security. The paper will then conclude with recommendations on how to bolster our credibility in the region without instigating a conflict with China.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Fertile Ground for Conflict***

The situation in the South China Sea is changing on a daily basis. The media stream throughout the region follows each side and chronicles the moves they make. China continues to build landmasses upon reefs for military purposes and the US send freedom of navigation mission's right outside the twelve nautical mile zone to dispute their claims. The points of contention are vastly different depending on what side of the issue you are being exposed to. Adam Liff and John Ikenberry both specialists in international affairs are just a few of the voices who have noted that the Asia Pacific region is fertile ground for military competition and conflict. This fertile ground for competition is highlighted by the fact that by the year 2020 the US Navy and Air Force will have 60 percent of their forces in the Western Pacific. If China continues to grow economically, so too will their bullying antics in the South China Sea along with their Anti-Access/Anti Denial technology. China is attempting to make the Western Pacific a "no-go" zone to transit without their knowledge or permission for such movements. This emerging issue is evident by the military expenditures of Asia pacific nations, most notably China. The vast amount of resources being poured into military equipment and technology in the region is creating a security dilemma that will not be resolved anytime in the near future. The outcome of this dilemma is vitally important for the economic and strategic future of the region. The situation in the Western Pacific presents concerns for the entire world and there are drastic repercussions should one side prevail over the other.

### ***A Peaceful Rise?***

The Chinese Government claims that their actions are peaceful in nature and are geared towards economic development and shared prosperity along with other nations of the world.

China maintains that it will pursue an independent foreign policy that opposes power politics, expansion and hegemony. The Chinese will build and maintain a strong national defense while maintaining its sovereignty of home and developmental interests. They will maintain a no “first use” policy on strategic weapons. President Xi is implementing a new strategic role for China in world affairs and this policy is presenting challenges for the United States in the region.

Suisheng Zhao, Professor and Director for the Center for China-US Cooperation at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Denver University argues that there cannot be one sole superpower in the region and that all parties must work together for the economic and security of the region. The only other alternative would be what Zhao deems a new Cold War, Zhao explores the topic of working in a cooperative fashion in the region to ensure all sides goals and objectives are met. With the China and the US working in a cooperative fashion, world peace and economic stability and will be assured.

### ***American Pivot***

President Obama States that the United States is at a “moment of transition”, with ending wars in Iraq, winding down operations in Afghanistan while attempting to jumpstart the economy and get the US’s fiscal house in order. The defense challenges that America faces will include the security and the economic growth of the Asia Pacific region. The 2012 DoD publication lays out a roadmap for the transformation of the Department of Defense (DoD) over the next decade and the strategic direction for the Western Pacific. This new direction includes a focus on the economic and military growth among many Asia Pacific nations. The publication does not account for sequestration cuts that have decimated some of the programs within the DoD and that it downplays China’s emerging world power status.

## ***How We Will Fight***

While all nations strive for peace they must be prepared for war, Jan Van Tol and others debate the fact that if a conflict broke out in the South China Sea between China and the US, there would be significant operational issues that the US military would face. The technological advancements of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) will make the US strategic advantage it has had in the region for six plus decades negligible. Jan and others explore the steps the US must take in order to maintain a balance for Air and Sea power in the region. This exploration of means to achieve objectives includes the necessity for an Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept that will require joint coordination between all military services. The US military has continuously evolved to meet new and emerging threats throughout history. The newest concept to reduce risk across the spectrum of operations is to thwart the advancing enemy capabilities by using a combination of TTP's. The ASB concept was borrowed from the cold war era Air Land Battle in which we would counter Soviet attacks in Europe. The concept was designed to degrade rear echelon forces before they could do damage to our forces. The ASB concept differs from the Air Land Battle by operating in all domains of warfare (air, land, sea, space and cyberspace) utilizing joint forces. The rapid development of military technology will continually require adjustments to both sides' strategic aims.

## ***The Air Sea Battle***

Should conflict break out in the Western Pacific the only way the US will be victorious is by utilizing the Air-Sea Battle concept. The ASB concept was conceptualized by the Department of Defense (DOD) and has been a theory that has continually changed along with the weapons and technology that we use today. As a nation the US has continually changed our Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTP's) to meet new and emerging threats throughout time. The

newest concept to reduce risk across the spectrum of operations is to thwart or destabilize the advancing enemy capabilities. The ASB concept was borrowed from the cold war era Air Land Battle in which we would counter Soviet attacks in Europe. The concept was designed to degrade rear echelon forces before they could do damage to our forces. The ASB concept differs from the Air Land Battle by operating in all domains of warfare (air, land, sea, space and cyberspace) utilizing joint forces. This document is a more recent publication than the 2010 Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments document demonstrates the rapid pace of technology advancement within the theater and what steps the US needs to take to stay one step ahead of the Chinese People's Liberation Army.

## **BACKGROUND**

### ***Brief Historical Context End and Post WWII***

The relationship between China and the US has not always been as tense as they are in present day. In the early years of World War II, China was at war with Japan and a member of the Allied Powers. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, China and the US worked closely together to thwart their common enemy Japan. On January 3, 1942, a unified coalition of Allied Powers was established to better coordinate and plan operations against the Axis powers. President of China (ROC) Chiang Kai-shek reluctantly agreed to President Roosevelt's plan to take command of the entire Chinese Theater, which included Thailand, Vietnam and Burma.<sup>8</sup>

With the US in control of the entire Pacific Theater, the planning, coordination and employment of military force was streamlined with the assistance of the coalition. As the war grinded on, problems began to show up in the China Theater, supply lines were becoming ambushed by Axis powers along with communist insurgents. This caused disruption in the US logistical flow resulting in mission degradation within this theater. The major Heads of State for

the Allied Power met in Cairo in the winter of 1943, to discuss the progress of the war. This meeting became known as the Cairo Conference and put into play many issues at the heart of the current SCS issue. President Roosevelt, President Kai-Shek and Prime Minister Winston Churchill engaged in several days of meetings, discussing topics such as the future of Asia, logistics and ensuring China that

“Japan shall be stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which she has seized or occupied since the beginning of the First World War in 1914, and that all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese, such as Manchuria, Formosa, and the Pescadores, shall be restored to the Republic of China.”<sup>9</sup>

With the proclamation that China would gain all of its lost territory back, China and President Kai-Shek, walked away from the Cairo Conference with their heads held high and victorious. The boisterous attitude and circumstance surrounding the Cairo Conference was short lived, Kai-Shek had bigger internal problems to include increasing battles between communist leaning factions and his own political party with accusations of political intimidation and violence against individuals and organizations not supportive of the Shek Government. The communist leaning factions eventually formed a formidable group to fight China’s true enemies the US and Japan.<sup>10</sup> During subsequent meetings between Allied Powers (Tehran and Yalta Conferences) China was notably absent, this was due in part to the fact that the meetings focused on the Eastern Front, but several key decisions took place in China’s absence. The most notable of these decisions was put into action at the Tehran Conference where President Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin agreed on the principle that if the Soviet Union declared war against Japan after Germany was defeated, the Soviet Union would receive material support and access to several seaports in Manchurian and Dairen,<sup>11</sup> all located within China’s borders. This decision was a betrayal in the eyes of China because they were



never consulted regarding the seaport exchange. This ultimately led to the downfall of the Nationalist Chinese party.

Upon Japan's surrender in September of 1945, popular support for communists was increasing. Numerous segments of the Chinese society were leery of wartime corruption and silencing of communists in Nationalist held territory. China's communist party under the leadership of Mao Zedong was engaged with Kai-Shek's Nationalists in an all-out civil war for control of the country.

An American mission was established in China to assist the Chinese with various military matters in an advisory role. The end goal of the mission would be to ensure Chinese forces would be "capable of coping with any situation that may confront China."<sup>12</sup> Ultimately the mission and the American goal to establish a coalition government failed. On October 1, 1949 in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, Mao established the People's Republic of China (PRC) while Kai-Shek and his followers fled to the island of Taiwan and established a government there under the parameters on the 1947 Constitution of China.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Military downsizing in PACOM***

In the aftermath of WWII, the United States was the undisputed dominant power in the Western Pacific. Security agreements were set up with partner nations around the Pacific. Of the more notable agreements in place for the southern Pacific include the agreement between the US, Australia and New Zealand, which was signed on September 1, 1951. The agreement stated that any armed attack on any of the partner countries would be dangerous to peace and safety and that all signatories would respond to meet the common danger. Other important agreements include the Philippine Treaty, the Republic of Korea Treaty and the Southeast Asia Treaty all of which were signed in the 1950-1954 timeframe. The final notable treaty put in place for the Asia-

Pacific region was the 1960 Japan Treaty. All the aforementioned treaties have similar language that focuses on defense against armed attack, in the region<sup>14</sup>. These agreements are still in place today and are a cornerstone of the US's strategic umbrella for our partner nations.

With the end of the war, many of the atolls such as Johnston and Palmyra that the US had used as part of its island hopping campaign were shuttered and abandoned. Other atolls such as Midway and Wake were held in dormant status and reactivated for the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The mainstays of the PACOM were the hubs of Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines. All of these locations had representation from all branches of service and played a vital part in the, US power projection for our allies and friends in the region. As with any operation the political will and cooperation of the host nation is required to continue partnerships and strategic goals. This became evidently clear in the early 1990's when the government of the Philippines did not renew the basing agreement for Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay Naval Base. The eruption of Mt Pinatubo further complicated the situation as Clark Air Base suffered extensive damage. With the pullout of US forces from the Philippines it added to the decline of US influence in the region. Masashi Nishihara, an analysis of security policies in the Pacific was quoted "Without bases in the Philippines, I don't think there is any question that the US influence in Asia will decline."<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Economic and Military Rise of China***

After the PRC was established the Government of China adhered to the traditional principals of a communist government; centrally controlled government ownership, stagnant economy and relatively isolated from the rest of the world.<sup>16</sup> The economic powerhouse vision that Mao envisioned was taken to the grave with him. Mao's replacement, Deng Xiaoping pursued a new ideology regarding China's economy; he instituted new programs and

philosophies in order to develop China into a world economic power. Xiaoping's basis for this economic revolution was based on principals of industry, agriculture, defense and science and technology.<sup>17</sup> While the country still adhered to communist principals the economic vision was a hybrid of western ideology of free market principals and competition. Xiaoping had the belief that it did not matter what economic policy (socialist or capitalist) the country adhered to, what mattered was if that specific policy would boost the economy<sup>18</sup> Entire sections of the Chinese countryside were transformed into economic development zones where free market theories could be tested. The Chinese government started to offer tax incentives and discount labor to outside investment firms and what started as a small spark eventually turned in to one of the world's largest economies. The transition of China into a major player on the economic stage did have its repercussions here in the US The cost of labor in China was a fraction of what is was here at home and numerous American manufacturing companies closed their doors and headed east to boost their financials.

With China being a superpower on the economic stage and vast amounts of revenue pouring into their coffers, the Chinese Government invested massive sums of money into their military machine. In 1989 the Chinese Government had a published military budget of less than five billion dollars. The most recent figures that were published by the Chinese government put the figure between 121-130 billion dollars<sup>19</sup>. Many military leaders around the world believe this figure to be on the low end of the spectrum based on internal assessments and think tank research. This military spending spree had has continued for nearly a quarter of a century, and we are now seeing the fruits of their labor. China has introduced a slew of new and upgraded weapons systems to all segments of the PLA while investing heavily in the areas of advanced technology, space and cyberspace.

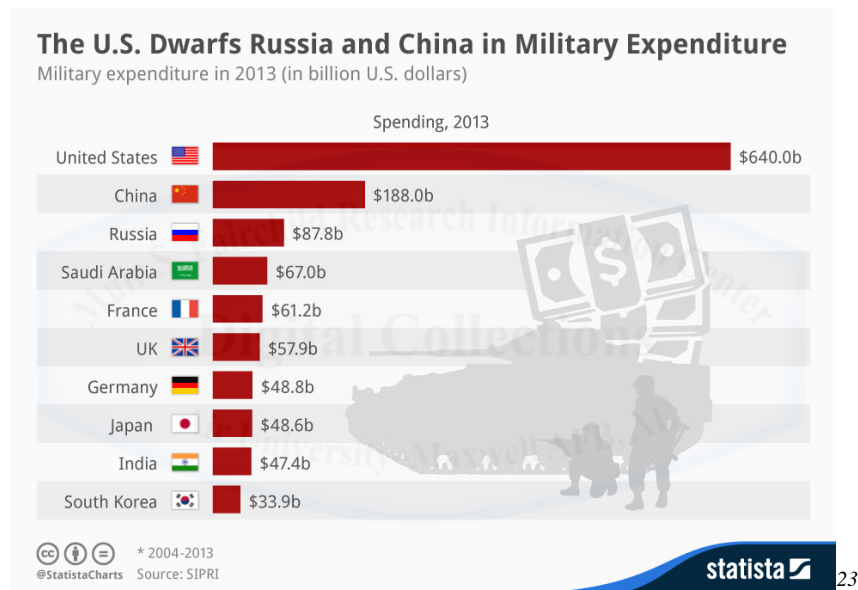
One of the most heavily invested areas of defense for China is their Anti-Access/Area Denial platforms (A2/AD). The investment in A2/AD resources has left the US scrambling for ways to counter the new threat. China has pushed these technologies further out from the Chinese mainland and they now pose a threat to US fourth and fifth generation fighters and the heart of our navy, the aircraft carrier. Another developing A2/AD project that China is actively working on is the “Guam Killer”, which is essentially a ballistic missile that has been fitted with conventional warheads, reports also state that the Guam Killer has anti-ship capabilities as well. While the missile is not new, it enables the Chinese to target Guam and with conventional weapons<sup>20</sup>. China’s advanced counter maritime and counter air systems are designed to meet and or exceed the capabilities of our most modern military technology. China is actively fielding ballistic missiles designed to target military facilities in the region and, ultimately disrupt the American power projection that had been unopposed for half a century.<sup>21</sup> These improvements in the layered defense of the Chinese mainland has disrupted the US power projection platform to a point where rethinking of the expeditionary forces model is put into question. Any potential conflict that occurs in the Western Pacific will play into China’s favor based on geography and the expansion of their A2/AD resources. While the US still maintains a technological advantage, that advantage is shrinking on a yearly basis. As the US and China become near peer adversaries the question remains, what would a potential military match up look like and is cooperation between the two countries out of the question?

## **CHINA-THE DRAGON IN THE ROOM**

### ***Military Conflict-Peer/Near Peer Adversary***

Si vis pacem, para bellum-If you want peace, prepare for war. This Latin adage has been passed down from warriors for centuries and still holds true today. Should the US and China

become involved in a military conflict, the outcome could surprise many who have debated this hypothetical matchup for years. The US spends more on national defense on an annual basis than any other nation; China now sits in second position on the military spending chart although the numbers provided by the Chinese government are believed to be significantly lower than what is actually being spent<sup>22</sup>. It is difficult to interpret the difference in the budget projections by the Chinese but one possible explanation could be the dual use of technology. One such program that is dual use is their space program which is heavily geared towards military usage.



Over the past quarter century as the US was engaged in expeditionary movements and the War on Terrorism in the Middle East, China was slowly moving from a coastal defense force in the region to a regional military power, increasing military at an average of over 9% per year for the last decade<sup>24</sup>. The technological improvements in all aspects of their military now make them a viable threat to the US in the Pacific. China's increased military spending can be directly be tied to their increasing rhetoric and provocative actions in the SCS.

One area that has many defense officials deeply concerned is the Chinese space program. It is a rapidly advancing program that will take an armed conflict into space by knocking out an adversary's military space capability. What is known about that program is that there is little to no separation between the civilian space and the military space programs. The programs utilize many of the same facilities and share information that benefits the state. This concern is based on the fact that as China expands its physical territory it allows for ground-based stations to communicate with its extensive array of satellites in orbit. This network allows greater stand off distance and early warning for Chinese defense officials and precision strike capability.<sup>25</sup> China's anti-satellite capability is among the best in the world and they currently have a wide array of killer satellites in orbit. This capability alone poses a grave threat to the US military as many of our weapons systems rely on GPS guidance and communication<sup>26</sup>.

Like the US Armed Services, China's military branches are structured in a similar fashion, to defend the land, sea and air and project power if necessary around China's interests. All of these branches are under the grand umbrella of The People's Liberation Army (PLA). The branches are composed of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Liberation Navy (PLAN), People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the Second Artillery Force which is command and control for China's nuclear deterrent. China also has a national police force and a force that is similar to our National Guard and reserve forces.

The PLA is similar to the US Army as it is the home of the highly mobile and agile land armor forces. The army includes units that protect the thirteen thousand mile land boarder and the nine thousand miles of coastline<sup>27</sup>. The PLA has a total strength of approximately 850,000 troops and is changing its structure to be more maneuverable, utilizing advanced technology in its offensive and defensive capabilities.

The PLAN is where a large portion of China's defense budget is going to. As they transition from a costal navy to a regional and eventually blue sea navy the costs associated with such a move are substantial. The Office of National Intelligence states "China's force modernization has concentrated on improving the quality of its force, rather than its size."<sup>28</sup> Some of the improvements that the PLAN has made include retiring older legacy ships that were designed for a single purpose and replacing them with multi-dimensional ships. China's modern fleet is capable of long-term deployments and operations with minimal support of a dedicated port. Additional advancements include the integration of A2/AD capabilities with their ground platforms on various atolls in the SCS<sup>29</sup>. Part of this A2/AD integrated system is the key to all modern navies, the aircraft carrier. China purchased and refurbished an ex-Ukrainian aircraft carrier, to become the first carrier in China's fleet. The carrier is obsolete when compared to US carriers but it does give the Chinese additional reach from its home shores. Their carrier is diesel powered and does not have catapults to launch aircraft from the deck. Defense analysts claim that that the carrier is a starter carrier and China will eventually produce an organic carrier comparable to US and or Russian carriers<sup>30</sup>.

The PLAAF is also going through a time of growth and modernization to counter other nations developing air forces. China relied heavily on the Soviet Union and Russia to field its air force throughout much of the nation's history. Their fleet includes various models of the MiG and Flanker family, which are still in use today. What China has become an expert at doing is incorporating designs (stealing) from other countries without the development cost.<sup>31</sup> China's organic military aircraft development is increasing and the similarities between Russian and US designs are unavoidable in the new Chinese fleet<sup>32</sup>. China is developing a fifth generation fighter to be comparable to the US F-22 and F-35. The Chinese J-31 Gyrfalcon is strikingly similar in

looks and dimensions to the F-35 and many have claimed that the Chinese government obtained blueprints to the F-35 in a 2009 hacking attack on Lockheed Martin. Keith Alexander, the head of US Cyber Command stated, “Chinese military and commercial cyber theft amount to “the greatest transfer of wealth in history.”<sup>33</sup> Another fifth generation fighter that China is currently developing is the J-20, initial reports state that the J-20 will have the ability to be a long-range strike fighter and rival that of the F-22<sup>34</sup>. There is also talk of another case of industrial espionage regarding the J-20 as it does have some similarity to the front section of an F-22. China has also recognized the force multiplying capabilities of Remote Piloted Aircraft (RPA’s). They are actively using, developing and marketing RPA’s around the world and will likely become the leading global exporter of such systems. RPA’s use in the PLA will extend their influence and reach in contested areas such as the SCS<sup>35</sup> With the cost of production dropping and the technology increasing the number of RPA’s around the world will continue to increase.

The Second Artillery Force is in control of China’s nuclear arsenal. China joined the nuclear club in 1964 with their first nuclear test. Their knowledge and experience has risen since that time and they have the same delivery methods as the U.S and Russia, although at much smaller numbers. China does not use the nuclear deterrent as a cornerstone of its defense strategy; rather the use of nuclear weapons is strictly laid out in China’s strategic guidance and highlighted in three key principals.

The first principal is that China will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states. The second principal is that China will not use nuclear weapons to respond to a conventional attack and the last principal, which is the most mentioned, is that China adheres to a no first use policy<sup>36</sup>. This differs significantly from US policy which states: “the United States will only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital

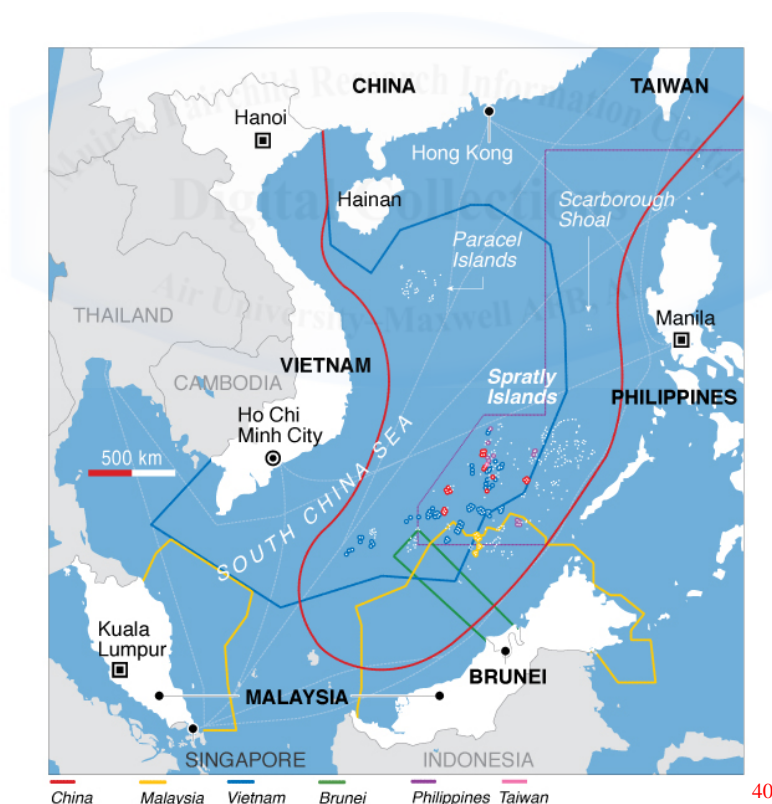


interests of the United States or its allies and partners”<sup>37</sup>. This difference has added to the distrust already present regarding each country's intention especially over the US defense of Taiwan and other regional matters. China's nuclear weapons principals could be changing as the SCS tensions increase and the numbers of nuclear weapons in China's arsenal continue to rise.

The brief discussion of China's military capability demonstrates that they are advancing their technologies and military capabilities to be at a near peer/peer status with the US and Russia. While there are many questions regarding China's ability to survive in combat the same can be said regarding the US arsenal against a peer adversary. Computer simulations, static testing environments and defense industry officials can make military hardware look phenomenal, but until it is actually combat validated against a peer adversary, many questions will remain. The technological advantages the militaries once relied on are becoming a moot point. With superior forces we deployed throughout the Middle East and Afghanistan we still became a victim to political will and have been unable to eliminate the asymmetric forces in those theaters. A well prepared and capable force is required at all times to defend the homeland and our allies abroad, but this too presents a problem. Based on recent congressional testimony from the Army Chief of Staff and the Secretary of the Air Force, it would be difficult to conduct sustained combat operations “against a lethal hybrid threat or near-peer adversary.”<sup>38</sup> All branches of the US military are suffering from devastating effects of the Budget Control Act (BCA) and estimate that any given time, only one third to one half of the force are combat capable. China is well aware of the BCA and its effects on the military; it can be assumed that they are testing the limits of their actions in the region as they prepare for the US (economic and military) policy shift to the Pacific.

## *China's Expanding Territory*

The SCS is made up of approximately 1.4 million miles of ocean with four main island chains that each consist of hundreds if not thousands of tiny reefs or atoll's. The Pratas, Parcel, Spratly and Scarborough Islands are contested by China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam Indonesia and Brunei.<sup>39</sup> Within this area is the world busiest shipping zone, a vast array of natural resources and competing claims to who is the rightful owner. With so much at play, the issue is obviously a point of debate and contention amongst all involved. While some agreements have been made between China and others regarding territorial disputes this is the exception and not the norm.



The US Pivot to the Pacific comes at a vital time to ensure that the US has continued presence and acts as a counterweight to the increasing Chinese diplomatic and military power in the region<sup>41</sup>. The Chinese Government made a push to the United Nations in 2009 and again in

2011 that China's maritime claims to the SCS are unquestionable and rooted in historical evidence and legal proceedings<sup>42</sup>. China has never produced any information regarding their claims but does refer to the map of 1947 commonly referred to as the nine-dash line. The dashes on the map do not have coordinates, fixed geographical features or any other identifying features to base the claims off of which is why it has created an international controversy.<sup>43</sup> Some of the areas claimed by China extend almost 1000 miles from the southernmost point of Chinese territory; this is far beyond the established limits that are recognized by the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The UNCLOS is a roadmap that lays out protections and prohibitions on the use of the oceans of the world. This framework was established in 1982 after intense debate that lasted almost a decade. The UNCLOS went into effect in 1994 and like most other treaties it has almost universal support. All of the aforementioned countries with the exception of Taiwan are signatories of the law<sup>44</sup>. Taiwan was unable to sign as they are not a recognized state by the UN, but they do adhere to the intent of the law. While the UNCLOS does state what can and cannot be done involving oceans, it is flawed in the fact that it does not state how to resolve disputed territory in regards to offshore islands. Under UNCLOS each coastal state claimant has 12 miles of territorial waters immediately adjacent to their shores that they can protect with military means if necessary, subject to passage rights if conditions are met<sup>45</sup>. The UN complicated matters when they changed the treaty to include Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), which extend outward to 200 nautical miles and guarantees the claimant exclusive rights to undersea resources both living and non-living. This presents a problem for nations in that SCS region, as there are overlapping claims in the narrower parts of the SCS.

The creation of man-made reefs has expanded at a rapid pace under President Jin. The most visible and reported on in the media is the Spratly Island Chain where China has transformed coral reefs into full military outposts complete with landing strips and A2/AD capabilities. The US has contested Chinas Claim by sending over flights of military aircraft and freedom of navigation sails by the navy in close proximity to the newly created landmasses.

***Can the US Cooperate with China on Security Matters in the Region?***

There is no hiding the facts that China is investing heavily in military capabilities in the SCS to deter and defeat foreign power projection in the Western Pacific should a conflict occur in the region<sup>46</sup>. China is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council big five and a member of the original nations who possess known nuclear weapons. China downplays their military advances and claims that they are just playing catch up to defend themselves against other nations. As General Chen Brngde stated in a 2009 speech in Australia:

“A country embracing policies for peace, even though it has a robust military, will not wage war; but a belligerent country will, even though it is militarily weak. China maintains a defense policy which is defensive in nature, implements the military strategy of ‘active defense,’ and vigorously advocates the New Security Outlook of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination.”<sup>47</sup>

President Xi Jinping has made it well known to the world that he is revitalizing the People’s Liberation Army and moving away from the isolationist model that they have maintained for years. Replacing the old model will be a smaller, more agile, technologically advanced expeditionary type of force. This force will be able to project Chinese power to all points of the world much like the current US model. While the size and reach of their Navy is years away from becoming an equal to that of the United States, they have taken concrete steps to expand their maritime capabilities. Examples of China flexing their new maritime muscle include China getting involved in anti-piracy operations of the coast of Africa starting in 2009 and conducting military training exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean. China also provided

naval escorts in a joint effort with several nations in the removal of chemical weapons out of Syria and provided search and rescue efforts for the Malaysia Airlines incident. The Chinese government has also garnered support agreements with Pakistan for a long-term port use for ship repairs, fueling and other uses. The presence of Chinese Peacekeeping observers under the United Nations flag is also on the rise, although the locations for such observers are in relatively low US presence locations such as Darfur, Sudan and Lebanon.<sup>48</sup>

With China yearning to have a presence and ultimately influence in regions around the world the question asked by many is can the US and China cooperate on security matters in the Western Pacific? Much has been done in various arenas to promote cooperation on shared issues of interest such as nuclear security matters in the region and civil space cooperation. A highlight of this cooperation is the creation of a Center of Excellence on Nuclear Security in Beijing. This center was the product of Department of Energy and China's Atomic Energy Authority collaboration and cooperation to share crosstalk amongst partners to highlight best practices and share advanced technologies regarding nuclear security.<sup>49</sup> The one area that has had minimal agreement and cooperation on is the area of military cooperation. This theme continued until 2012 when then Defense Secretary Leon Panetta extended an invitation to China to participate in the Rim of the Pacific military (RIMPAC) exercise. The exercise is the world's largest international maritime exercise involving nations with an interest in the Pacific region. China accepted the invitation and eventually participated in the 2014 RIMPAC exercise mainly focusing on the medical, anti-piracy, explosive ordinance disposal and gunnery exercises<sup>50</sup>. While China did participate in RIMPAC they did so with a surveillance ship and didn't bring much to the exercise other than conducting surveillance on other nations who were participants.

The major stumbling block for the US regarding military to military cooperation with China is the lack of transparency regarding China's military buildup.

## **ANALYSIS**

### ***Why it Matters***

Military theorists have viewed the Western Pacific as a strategic area of the world for centuries. The benefits of the sea for economic transport yielded huge rewards for nations who project power far beyond their borders. Nations who control sea-lanes in contested territory truly have an upper hand in all activities within the region. Navies that have fixed ports within a region have an advantage due to the ease of repairs, replenishing and refueling stops. The Western Pacific is chalked full of various ports that are friendly of US vessels although China is creating fixed ports and new economic ties on a monthly basis within the region. The US has never left the region and has always maintained strong diplomatic ties with many countries in the region. One can say that the US took the region for granted from a military standpoint for several decades while dealing with other matters that include the collapse of the US economy and fighting simultaneous wars in the Middle East<sup>51</sup>. Many of our partner countries in the region began to question the commitment of the US as China began to impose their will politically, economically and militarily in the region. President Obama and his advisors saw this and made the decision to flex out strength in the region by realigning troops towards the Pacific. This included Marine Expeditionary Forces conducting 6-month rotations to Australia to increase cooperation and training time with our counterparts. Others signs of increased military funding in the Western Pacific include the re-investment in Guam and the various infrastructures at Anderson AFB, Northwest Field, and Naval Base Guam. The Philippines has moved legislation

through their congress for an increased US military presence on the island and allocated the former spaces at Subic Bay and Clark AFB for US use.

## **COURSES OF ACTION**

### ***Stay the Course***

The US is at a precipice regarding the situation in the Western Pacific. We as a nation can stand by and let the current back and forth go on with no resolution in sight or we can take actions to preserve the US name and presence in the area. The debate over the military strategy of the pivot or rebalance to Asia can be debated for years to come. President Obama made the decision in 2011 to refocus our bearings on the region which we let slip away by being complaisant and overconfident. China exploited the opportunity when the US left a crack in the door and now we are faced with the daily headlines of peacocking in the Region by both nations.

### ***Diplomatic Solutions***

Looking deeper than the surface scratch into the dynamics of the Western Pacific power struggle, it is much more involved than the two headline nations of the US and China. Nations such as Australia, North and South Korea, Vietnam, Brunei the Philippines and many others all have competing strategic interests in the region. The US acts as an intermediary in the region to protect the vital shipping lanes that connect the Pacific to the India Ocean. The freedom of navigation has been a constant message that the US proclaims whenever China protests foreign vessels and militaries operating in their proclaimed territorial waters. This freedom of navigation and controlling of a particular swath of sea is not a new premise but rather a centuries old theory that was promoted by Naval Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan proclaimed that the “commercial value cannot be separated from military in sea strategy, for the greatest interest of the sea is commerce<sup>52</sup>” All countries in the region want to protect the freedom of navigation in

the area although they all have differing position on how to accomplish this. The multilateral foreign policy negotiators of all concerned nations need to engage on this topic and come to some sort of agreement. Negotiations amongst a set of competing ideals and ideologies are one of the most complex issues nations have to deal with on a daily basis. All sides involved need to have a clear strategy of what they want, and what they are willing to give up to achieve their goals and objectives.

### ***Military Engagement***

A military engagement between the US and China would have global consequences with no real victor after the last shots be it bullets or cyber shots were fired. While China does claim to have a sizable advantage in numbers of military personnel, the military equipment side of the coin reveals another story. The US has an advantage in all equipment categories with the exception of battle tanks and artillery. While numbers don't take into account technology, the technological advantage still lies with the US military.

**China & US military comparison**

China	Budget*	US
\$129bn 2.1% 	Total % of GDP	\$581bn 3.5% 
2,333,000 	Personnel	1,433,150 
Equipment		
6,540 	Tanks	2,785 
1,667 	Fighter aircraft	2,397 
6 prototypes 	of which stealth fighters	246 
some 	Heavy UAVs	517 
69 	Submarines	73 
1 	Aircraft carriers	10 
17 	Destroyers	62 
66 	ICBM launchers	450 

UAV: Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile. \*2014

Source: IISS, World Bank

BBC



## CONCLUSION

The situation in the Western Pacific is not going away anytime in the near future. With numerous competing interests and potentially billions of dollars in untapped oil and gas reserves among other resources it is obvious why there is so much contention in the area. The situation is unique for the US due to the fact that the closest US territory is nearly 2000 miles from the Chinese mainland; we have a strategic interest in the region but no real “property” to claim. The research question asked “how can the United States re-gain military influence with our strategic partners and allies while gaining cooperation with China in the Western Pacific Theater of Operations”? The answer to that is open communication, direct dialogue and the willingness to use military force to achieve peace and stability in the region. The various US military bases in the region are well within striking distance for the Chinese and they have publicly stated that they have the developed weaponry to take out those threats first. While the US has always maintained a military presence in the Western Pacific, the need for an increased presence in all forms is what is needed in order to keep China in check as a rising power. China’s military rise is directly tied to their economic rise on the world stage. The strength or weakness of the Chinese economy is directly tied to the health of the global economy. As China increases their manufacturing for the world their need for scarce resources is also on the rise. With the dwindling supply of natural resources, the Chinese have viewed the SCS as an untapped reserve. Various other competing nations also have claims in the SCS region and are dependent upon the US to voice their concerns, and in many cases to provide the strategic umbrella for protection. The US and China could revert back to a Cold War mentality where each side is pouring billions into their military infrastructure, but that has serious implications for both countries in the fragile world economy. The immediate concern is the daily interaction that both militaries are having in

the contested SCS region. China is increasingly upping the ante in regards to unsafe aerial maneuvers around US surveillance planes, while their naval presence and interactions are also increasing. China's rhetoric continues to increase and if the current situation goes unchecked without diplomatic intervention an unintended miscue on either side could have disastrous implications for the world.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The proper mixture of diplomacy with military backing is the correct and measured response to the increasing tension in the region. China is currently in legal battles with various nations over their claims regarding the SCS. Despite this, China continues to flaunt their engineering achievements of making habitable islands out of reef copings and immediately militarizing the islands. A strong united front among all Asia Pacific nations is needed to confront China and their bullying antics. Should a united front of diplomacy fail, then the coalition should be ready to respond militarily. A military conflict would extend the militaries of the Western Pacific to unprecedented levels. With China increasingly developing weapons intended to deny or disrupt US intervention in the region, the US needs to be vigilant and ready in its interactions with China. Many of the nations in the region rely on the US for support both economically and militarily, if this is disrupted the tactical battle plan changes immensely. Some of these changes could be in the form of military alliances with China's neighbors, on the northern and southern front. The US has strengthened its relationship with Mongolia over the past several decades. The US conducts joint exercises with the Mongolians, but increased economic support to Mongolia could open up new strategic fronts that would force China to watch not only its eastern seafront but its northern border as well. On the southern border there

are several countries where the US could increase relation to include Bhutan, Nepal and Burma. Fostering increased relationships in the area could be extremely beneficial in the years to come.



## **Appendix A**

### **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

A2/AD- Anti Access/ Area Denial

ASB-Air Sea Battle

BCA-Budget Control Act

DoD-Department of Defense

EEZ-Exclusive Economic Zone

PACOM-Pacific Command

PLA-People's Liberation Army

PLAN-People's Liberation Army Navy

PLAAF- People's Liberation Army Air Force

PRC-People's Republic of China

RIMPAC-Rim of the Pacific

ROC-Republic of China

SCS- South China Sea

TTP's- Tactics, Techniques and Procedures

UNCLOS- United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea

WWII- World War II

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